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Black Males and Complexion and Phenotype: A case study of Portland, Oregon

Christopher Potts and Ethan Johnson

NCBS Thursday, March 12th
Atlanta, Georgia

Intro. Continued

- Complexion and phenotype are significant in virtually all aspects of Black life.
- Black men in general are less likely to acknowledge and discuss issues of physical attractiveness, that they feel less attractive or that their complexion shapes how they feel about themselves (Veras, 2016).
- We claim the Portland Metro Area (PMA) is an important place to explore how complexion and phenotype shape Black life.

Intro. Continued

- In our study we examine the lives of 19 Black males through semi-structured interviews that asked how complexion and phenotype shaped their life.
- In general, we found that the absence of a Black parent played a significant role in how complexion and phenotype was experienced.
- Scholarship on complexion and phenotype has taken place in specific cities and states (Kanna, 2010), however, none that we have found has attempted to focus explicitly on how Black people make sense of complexion and phenotype within a specific region.

Literature

- Colorism has been defined as “the unequal treatment and discrimination of individuals belonging to the same racial or ethnic minority group based upon differences in physical features—most notably skin complexion (color), but also facial features and hair texture” (Wilder, 2015, p. 6).
- Both during and after slavery in the United States, anti-Black racism created a color bias that favors lighter-skinned persons of African descent (Wade, 2008).

Lit. Cont.

- After the abolition of official enslavement, a skin-tone stratification system persisted wherein people of African descent with lighter complexions “generally operated in a higher socioeconomic stratum” than their darker counterparts (Coard et. al., 2001, p. 257; Hunter, 2013).
- Studies are consistent in showing that Black people with dark complexions living in the United States are pushed out of school earlier (Hannon et al., 2013), discriminated in the workplace (Monk, 2014), sentenced to longer prison terms (Burch, 2015) and have skewed views of self-concept and feelings of lower self-efficacy; however, there is a gender-specific component (Thompson & Keith, 2001, 2004; Neal & Wilson, 1989; Wade, 2005, 2008; Veras, 2016).

Literature Cont.

- The literature on complexion is gendered female (Veras, 2016; Wilder, 2015).
- Living within the script of Black masculinity, preoccupations of image and beauty are for 'girls', which addresses why, at least in part, the scholarship on complexion is gendered female.
- Here, multiraciality “energizes white-supremacy and anti-blackness through the effects of its subversion” (Sexton, 2008, p. 20) and at the same time creating a space for Black/white multiracial people to locate themselves outside of blackness.

Portland Context

- The PMA is the “whitest” large city in America (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Portland State University historian Carl Abbott claims, “Portland is White—demographically and culturally” (Abbot, 2003, p. 26).
- Ironically, Portland, Oregon has developed a reputation as one of the best and politically progressive cities in the country to live.
- This suggests, that dark complexioned Black males in Oregon and the PMA are experiencing some of the highest rates of school pushout in the country.

PDX Context Cont.

- The high rates of exogamy and Black/white multiracials in the Portland Metro Area does not demonstrate that the region is more politically progressive and should in fact be linked to the original exclusion of Black people from the state.

Methods

- The research presented here is based on data collected during the 2016-17 and 2017-18 school years primarily through qualitative methods, that is, semi-structured interviews
- Creswell (2009) argues that when conducting a phenomenological study, 8 to 12 participants is recommended to fully capture the essence of participants' experiences and understanding, while providing rich textural descriptions.
- Thus, we claim that the particular socioeconomic conditions Black males in the PMA inhibited our number of participants.

Data Analysis

- As a result of these two initial observations of the data we decided to structure our analysis on examining the multiracial Black males separately from the mono-racial Black males as they had little to any presence of a Black parent in their lives.

Findings: *Multiracial Black Males--Lives Largely Absent of Blackness*

- The absence of Black people in their lives also contributed to the Black multi-racial males learning little if anything about complexion and phenotype and being regularly exposed to and targets of anti-Black racism. Not one of the Black multiracials provided evidence that their white parent or another family member helped them make sense of their racial identity or racism.
- While only Ron and Derrick recalled being called the N-word by a family member, each of the other Black multiracial males experienced being called the N-word from their peers and sometimes their friends.

Multiracial Black Males--Lives Largely Absent of Blackness Cont.

- The Black multiracials' lives are a testament to the continuing powerful anti-Black racism that generates the politically progressive reputation of the region.

Mono-Racial Black Males--Lives Embedded in Blackness

- Andre: I can give you a thousand examples of it. So, within the family nothing like a fight in the family. But just like a... Like people would say like... They give like stereotypes like, oh, you know, Such and Such is like... They're light-skinned. Or they're like this because they have dark skin, right? They think they're better because they're light, stuff like that. A lot of times people who are lighter skinned, they get more. They are able to do more. Or they don't have to like necessarily work off of like... They don't have to do much. They just have to be there. And people will look at them. And they like them. And they're accepted for who they are.

Black males usually experience colorism from their peers, not their families (Veras, 2016).

Mono-Racial Black Males--Lives Embedded in Blackness Cont.

- He stated, “I just got frustrated because I feel like people would dig on me. Like, they didn’t want to talk to me for me.”

Mono-Racial Black Males--Lives Embedded in Blackness Cont.

- Why should Andre claim or acknowledge he is being denigrated for his dark complexion when the stigma of hypersexuality remains?

Mono-Racial Black Males--Lives Embedded in Blackness Cont.

- Zack: The light skin girl, she was pretty always, and she never... she never took any losses as far as dating wise. Because if there was something that a young man did to her and she didn't like it, there was always somebody else to step in and fill that gap. Versus the dark skinned girl who more than likely didn't mature and grow into her beauty until she was eighteen, sixteen to twenty-five, or you know, even later than that. And what that does is, it just made her have to use her personality a little more to be attractive to men.

Mono-Racial Black Males--Lives Embedded in Blackness Cont.

- Reverse colorism is often done to males as a way of marking them as more feminine, which explains why lighter complexion males may not complain about being teased for their lighter complexion (Veras, 2016).

Conclusion

- In general, those Black males closer to the psychosomatic norm of whiteness had greater access to mainstream institutions and resources than their more richly hued peers. To state it another way, the combination of anti-Black racism and secondary discrimination experienced by the more richly hued participants, created challenges that their lighter peers did not experience.
- Lastly, regardless of complexion and phenotype all of the participants demonstrated in some way that anti-blackness negatively shaped their lives.

Conclusion Cont.

- The evidence provided from this group strongly suggests this as they were more often in non-Black romantic relationships and had found employment or worked in sectors outside stereotypical work such as, theater, medical science, physical training information technology and sales compared to the mono-racial Black males.
- Here, we are reminded of Sexton's claims that multiraciality and anti-blackness are inextricably interconnected and that as the former becomes more salient, so does the latter.

Conclusion Cont.

- In other words, Black masculinity is structured through complexion and dark complexion males gain some 'benefit' in the family and by extension within their communities, that is, because they are deemed less feminine.
- Within our study Black family life functioned as a place of safety for dark complexioned Black males in regards to complexion.
- Based on the responses of all our participants, however, relationships with non-Black women are deeply troubling and helps shed light on why so many Black men are not present in the lives of their children in Black/white multiracial relationships.

Conclusion Cont.

- He stated “I’m at a point where I’ve lived enough to be like, I’m Black. I’m Black as hell. And I wouldn’t want to be anything else.”